

# THE DECENT AVERAGE—By Richard Washburn Child

At 3 o'clock in the morning a man in a light gray pinstriped coat turned the corner of the narrow street and approached the twinkling electric sign over the door of Pollion's Turkish Bath. From the brighter and livelier thoroughfare with its resounding clatter of cab wheels and drone of electric cars there followed half a dozen individuals, some overdressed, others in threadbare, shiny garments, some dirty; one had a long white beard, which gave him a benevolent appearance; one smoked a cigarette, which drooped from one corner of his mouth as he talked out of the other; another was thick set and bull-necked, like a stunted giant. All of them whined along at his heels, taking turns at hypocritical and shameless solos of pleading. He shook his head doggedly.

Having reached the top step of the flight that led to the entrance to the baths, he turned on them all, "Go to blazes!" he shouted in a "Go to, you buzzards!"

The old man with the ministerial beard and watery, muskrat eyes poked his face up behind the heavy shoulder of the thick set man and answered for them all, "You're a cheap skate all right," he squealed. "All that money to the good and no handout to your friends."

"Friends!" yelled the man. "I've got good and full of friendship, I have!" He coughed drunkenly. "Friends! I've got one for every dollar in my pants. That's the kind of friends I've got."

He took something from his pocket and tossed it down the steps. The silent half dozen gave vent to animal cries. They pushed, scrambled, fought, dropped to their knees in the gutter with groping, clawing arms, panting, lustful. The youth of the cigarette succeeded in grasping the object; he staggered to his feet.

Uncontrolled, the bull-necked individual rushed at him with eyes red with sudden passion, caught him by the two ears and shook him savagely. "Share up!" he roared with an oath. The youth gave vent to a wail. "Leggo!" he whimpered. "It ain't money." He opened his hand. The object for which they had been struggling was a champagne cork.

"Money," said the man on the steps philosophically with alcoholic hoarseness. "Money, money, money." He tipped his hat onto the back of his head with the tips of his fingers. "Gee, ain't it a joke?" said he, and opened the door.

The smell of newly laundered towels, steam and bay rum scented the office, where a clock ticked above a counter on which lay a register with a pen across its autographed leaves. A foreign looking manager dozed in the enclosure behind and a yellow haired girl was reading feverishly from a volume of poetry bound in brown limp leather, which was open on her manicure table. She looked up, noted the stranger contemptuously and spoke in a shrill voice: "Mr. Suro!" The manager started up, rubbed each eye with a fat forefinger and opened first one and then the other to meet the beary gaze of the man across the counter.

"Correct," said he without courtesy. "Sign here."

Taking the pen, the patron of the baths wrote "John Nixon" in a large, untrained scrawl.

"Any valuables, chevies—eh?" asked Mr. Suro, offering an empty lock box out of a cabinet.

"Yep," answered Mr. Nixon. He drew a diamond pin from his tie and unscrewed a flashing stud from his shirt. From the side pocket of his trousers he pulled a handful of crumpled bills, his green and yellow backs mingled in a pleasant combination of color. He stuffed them into the box. Mr. Suro pulled the register toward him quickly and studied the stranger's signature; then he regarded the pile of money with silly, childish envy.

"Perhaps we'd better put it in de safe for you, Mr. Nixon," said he deferentially. He pulled open the top of a glass cigar case. "Chust took a cigar, sir," he went on. "I'll count this over if you don't mind."

"Give me a receipt for it," said Nixon, reaching into the cigar boxes.

Mr. Suro counted the bills with a wet thumb. It took him several minutes. "Two thousand eight hundred and thirty-one," he announced. The girl behind the volume of poetry was gazing upon the money with unwinking eyes. As the manager stepped toward the safe she rose to come forward with an affected little dab of her hand to her stray yellow locks. She leaned her head a little to one side and smiled encouragingly at Nixon.

"I'm on duty till 7:30," she said, archly. "You'll still be manicured as you go out, eh?"

"Oh, sure," said Nixon, polishing his cigar to watch the smoke curl upward. The girl looked disappointed. He had spoken so plainly a refusal.

"Garrying quite a little chance around," ventured Mr. Suro in an attempt to be amusing.

"Oh, sure," replied Nixon in a tired voice, tossing the cigar to the floor. "Lost two hundred this morning." He explained good naturedly. "Ten to one picked on the ponies this afternoon and the rest off the tables this evening." He looked up at the life insurance calendar. "Must be lucky date—October 13." His shaky hand was on the door to the dressing rooms.

"Let us know if you want anything," Mr. Nixon called out Suro. The girl leaned forward over the counter. "Don't forget, now," she cautioned, shaking a round, white finger at him. "Money?" said he half aloud, lapsing into his drunken world under the influence of the warmth of the inner air. "Money? Gosh! What a joke!"

The porcelain tiled hot room, with its sheeted reclining chairs about the walls, its red rug and table littered with newspapers, already contained four men when Nixon had undressed and descended to its swinking door. He noted this with satisfaction, for he liked the easy sociability of a hot room, which had been well versed in the analysis of human manners, he would have known proceeded from the instinctive democracy that arises when undressed man meets his naked fellow.

Six months in the great city had made him familiar with metropolitan types, but, having only a simple mind, he found himself at a loss to quickly classify the clothesless men inside. The lack of raiment swept away distinctions.

He was the only one who showed the enlarged heart, the bent and muscular back, the knotted forearms and undeveloped legs of a man who has been from childhood a manual laborer. The youngest of them all was a square jawed youth, with beautifully proportioned

limbs, still in the soft moulded lines of boyhood; the oldest was a paunched and ponderous gentleman, with a high forehead, which was distended in symmetrical spots as if it bent outward with the vigor of an internal intellect fretting at its bounds. The corners of his mouth expressed a weakness and rather explained why he had come to Pollion's instead of going to the bath at his club, where others of his own world might be surprised at his flushed skin, his hard breathing and vibrating finger tips.

A third man, who was notably thin, spoke of "making a Troy on Thursday," which proclaimed him a commercial traveller. His sparsely clad bones protruded ludicrously at every corner of his frame, but he was not the man to laugh at, since the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and the patient droop of his mouth showed that he knew humanly well. In the next chair sat a common human being.

John Nixon shuffled across the room less surely toward another unoccupied chair.

"Well," said the commercial traveller, "here we all are again."

The youth smiled. The oldest man put down his magazine to look solemnly at the speaker. "That's fine cynicism," said he after a moment. "You talk like one corpse addressing another in a graveyard."

"Cheer up," put in the common human being. "We're going to be here for a while together. We might as well make it pleasant. To-morrow we've got to chase the filthy lucre once more."

"Money," mumbled Nixon. "Money, money, money."

The others laughed at the look upon his face. "Yes, sirs—money," rattled the commercial traveller. "I guess I need it as much as anybody. This little racket has brought me down to hard pan. We all need it in our business."

"And in our play," added the youth assentively.

Nixon snapped his fingers among superior intellects. He had found this the easiest way to attract attention. "That ain't so," said he with conviction. "Money is hell."

"You don't want to give any away, do you?" asked the youth sarcastically. "My desk at college is covered with bills that are yelling for it."

Nixon looked from one to the other of the company. "I've got nearly three thousand in bills upstairs in the safe," said he. "It's what's left of \$75,000 that came to me last March. And in this room here—to-night—I'm going to give it away."

For a moment there was a strained silence and four pairs of open eyes; then the commercial traveller laughed.

"Say," he bantered, "what brand of cigarettes do you smoke?"

"Get out," said Nixon. "I'm sober, all right. I mean it."

"Let's hear his story," said the oldest man, smothering his thin gray hair judiciously. "There'll be plenty of takers if he's in earnest."

"Seven months ago, gents, I ran a cold steel tack machine for \$18 a week in a factory just outside Buffalo," said Nixon, nodding toward the oldest man. "I'll tell this to pass away the time, see?"

"Go ahead," urged the college youth, clasping his bare knees. "This is rich." "I ain't no hard to tell a yarn," Nixon went on. "But I used to work hard, see? It had been like that for thirty years. I don't look forty, do I? There'd come times when I'd wish I had money window out the lake and wish I had enough so I could live high stepping and knock off work for a time. Now there was my wife, she was different. She'd sing and rattle dishes in the kitchen and never want any better. It just suited her."

"There come along a feller one day as went into the office and asked to see me. Said he was a lawyer. And they called me down into the office and the feller says, 'Is your name John Nixon?' and I says 'Yes,' and he says, 'Do you remember your uncle, Ted Nixon?' Says I, 'I never seen him, he went west, when I was a kid.' Well, says he, 'he struck oil in Texas, and I'm sorry to tell you he's passed out of this life,' says he, and left you \$75,000 of his estate, he says. 'Holy smoke!' says I, pulling off my jumper. 'Wait till I get my coat,' I says."

"To get the money I had to come down to the city here. That night we struck town. The next day I had my cash—all good and hunky in the bank, except what I kept out to have a fling."

"The first thing I did was to get a-takin' with a cabman. He showed me the common human being, a big fellow over the tables. It was an all right picture too. A feller in there told me it cost a thousand dollars. I was feeling good, and people was looking at me thumping off bills to treat the crowd. So I bought the picture just for fun and smart and paid for it in cash right there. There was hawssed in my hair, all right. And Lord, how everybody loved me when they saw my roll."

"Been here ever since?" asked the commercial traveller.

"Ever since," answered Nixon. "Health gone, money going, half a man and half a sport. Gents, let me tell yer

—that's the kind of slave I've been. Gee, how I wish I was back at \$18 a week and hearing them tacks snippin' out of that machine and droppin' down into the boxes, pretty, new and shiny."

He cast a reflective glance at his biceps. An attendant opened the door and deftly swung a tray of metal cups into the room. "Ice water?" he asked, glancing up at the thermometer. The common human being reached for a cup, cupping down its contents, spilled a few drops on his leg, and drew it up, shivering. "My stars," said he, "I'd hate the monotony of a machine like that."

"I uster, too," replied Nixon. "I kind of got the idea I was pretty much abused, see? I joined a labor union. We thought we was slaves of the company we worked for. Slaves! Gee, money beats any company you ever see. I've got all over the notion that I was unhappy then. It's a heap of satisfaction."

The commercial traveller saw at once what he meant. "By George!" said he with brisk sympathy. "I for one think I'd be glad to have you come back."

"He deserted her," said the college youth, innocently brutal and nodding toward Nixon. "She knows the whole

story. But I'm not sure either," he added, as if his knowledge of mankind was profound.

The oldest man made a gesture toward the bony commercial traveller. "I like your faith, sir," he said unaffectedly. "I remember of betting on my college baseball team even when it used to lose. This is like it. You're backing humanity because it belongs to you."

"What was your college, sir?" asked the youth soberly. "The oldest man smiled, but did not answer for reasons of his own. "Women of the right sort will stand a awful lot," announced the common human being, much impressed with the weighty truth of his own words. "I have lots of faith in women. I think she'd be glad."

"See here," cried Nixon, who had been leaning far forward so that he might, by catching every word, assist his thick intellect. "Ain't it right for her to throw me over? Wouldn't she be a fool to like me back?"

"The Almighty God arranges all that," Nixon said doggedly. "I've chucked all my happiness with her into the river. Do you think I'd ever change it? Why, I'd bet my last cent she wouldn't even see me."

"If I had any money—" began the commercial traveller. "Make a pool," suggested the oldest man with interest. "Her own husband ought to know best, but he has described her pretty well in a way. He's made her real to all of us. I'm gambling she'll take him back."

"I'll take that side of it," said the common human being. "Me too," said the college youth. "I'm afraid I'm out," laughed the commercial traveller. "Unless," he went on, "a watch and seal ring will go at a valuation. I might as well take a chance."

Nixon stood up before the table. "There's two thousand eight hundred in the safe upstairs," said he with a little twisting smile. "I'd like to see it covered, gents. But I can't take any checks. Watches and rings are all right. Checks don't go."

The oldest man scowled. "Oh, what's the use?" said he, in the manner of one who is accustomed to unlimited credit. "I'll take checks from any of these others and give you one for the whole amount. I'll have the proprietor of the place put his endorsement on mine. You'd take that, wouldn't you?"

"That's good," assented Nixon. "If you want to trust the others, having money has made me a little dainty about checks, gents."

The oldest man arose and opened the swinging door. "Come here, Hans," he shouted to a sleepy attendant sitting on the platform of the weighing machine. "Go find Mr. Pollion and ask him to give me a check for two thousand eight

hundred. Mention my name. If he hasn't got that much in the bank ask him to get a check from his brother to make up the amount. Wake him up, if it's necessary."

"See here," he went on, addressing the nude figures inside the room. "We're a nice crowd. How are we going to settle this bet before morning?" The others looked at each other and laughed. "Fun's all over," said the common human being.

"Hold on," the commercial traveller said. "There is a way. Where does she live?" "Last I heard she's gone back to Elmira to her aunt—Sadie Dutton," Nixon answered.

"The telephone," suggested the commercial traveller. The oldest man nodded gravely as if it had been an idea of his own. "Some difficulty in finding Sadie Dutton of Elmira," the common human being

turned after a while with a telephone set with dangling green cords and a brass plug attached; a white slip of paper was held in the fingers of his other hand and a bundle of bills luxuriously thick and green was pressed beneath his arm.

"Give it to me," said the commercial traveller, reaching for the nickel instrument. The attendant handed the check to the oldest man. "Mr. Pollion says you are very welcome, Mr.—"

"Brown," interrupted the oldest man sharply. The commercial traveller glanced at the check. "It's now five minutes of 4, gentlemen," said he, retiring with the instrument to his chair. "We can now get down to business."

"Suppose you get her on the phone," said the common human being, "what's going to be your form of question?" Nixon stood up, shifting his feet nervously. He had been counting his money, and now he threw it in a pile on the table. "Just say you are a friend of John Nixon, that all his money has gone, and will she let him come back to her?"

"That's fair enough," put in the oldest man.

"Wait!" exclaimed the college youth. "It ain't fair to us to tell her his money is all gone."

"You'll know women better when you're older," snapped the oldest man. "Most of 'em will forgive a man in hard luck when they wouldn't listen to him at all if he was having everything his own way."

The youth reclined once more in his chair, a little conscious that he would know the world better later.

Taking down the receiver with an air of confidence, the commercial traveller waited for an answer. In a moment the ear-piece click-checked with the voice of the operator.

"Elmira Central—"

"What? Yes, this is 2192—All right." He hung up the receiver. "She'll call me," said he. The common human being whistled a running tune in an attempt to express his excitement which might have been in the air of the hot room. Nixon studied the palms of his hands. Once he drew a long breath, expelling it quickly through his lips. When the telephone bell rang with startling, undulating sharpness he jumped, nervously.

"God!" he shouted. "There it is." "Elmira Central?" asked the commercial traveller. "Hello—I want to get Sadie Dutton—not a subscriber—no, I don't think so—try the directory—give me nearest pay station—What—Sadie Dutton—All right, I'll hold it." He shifted the instrument, and the others leaned forward expectantly. The commercial traveller held the receiver to his ear with one eye shut.

"Hello—Yes—Not in the directory? I'm—Wait a minute—Give me the police station—headquarters—"

"Don't disconnect me with your office when I'm through talking. I'll put another call in Elmira. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and addressed the others in the hot room. "This is getting rather merry. He said with a dry smile."

"Yes—Hello—Eh—Oh, yes—Say this is important—lot of money involved. I want to find the residence of a Sadie Dutton—not in directory, but keeps a lodging house in Elmira somewhere. You don't know? Well, ask any of the patrolmen who are in the office—Yes, I'd be very much obliged."

The college youth tapped on the floor with his toes, which were drawn up in delighted excitement. "I don't quite see what he can do next if this fails," said the common human being to the oldest man. "Keep quiet!" returned the latter impatiently. "Somebody's on the other end now."

"Yes," said the commercial traveller. "You do—What number is it? Well, say, where's the nearest drugstore? What name?—Holbert?—Yes, I've got it—Anybody there nights?—Over the store, eh?—Thanks." He waited, listening intently. A taint slipped by. "Thunderation!" he exclaimed, jiggling the hook. "Yes—that you, Central?—What? New York? Cut me off from Elmira!—Oh, Lord!"

"Go ahead," said the oldest man brusquely. "Get Elmira again. That's all you can do." "Get me Elmira again," repeated the commercial traveller into the mouthpiece. "It's important! In a hurry." The common human being glanced up at the clock. Nixon watched the telephone instrument as if it were a living judge considering his fate. No gambling device of the many with which he had become familiar had had any such personality; his face wore an expression of dull pain and awe as he looked.

The thing was in operation once more. The commercial traveller craned his scrawny neck forward toward the mouthpiece. "All right—I want Holbert's drugstore—yes, Holbert's—Address? What do you want of the address?—Well, go ahead then and find out—Look here, Elmira, what all you?"

"Say," cried the college youth, touching the commercial traveller's elbow. "Don't let 'em give you the pay station. Get the apothecary's private telephone, or you won't wake the night clerk."

The other nodded. "I want the private

line of the drug store," said he to the instrument. "Ring them till they answer."

Nixon rose from his chair to pace back and forth with his eyes still on the nickel gleam of the telephone. The oldest man fingered the bold spot on the back of his ponderous head and then leaned forward toward the pile of paper money on the table, with the white check conspicuously assertive above the mass of engraved yellow and green notes. "I'll count this, if you don't mind," said he looking at Nixon, who assented with a gesture.

Once more the telephone became a sentient thing. The commercial traveller stirred; there was a shine of triumph in his expression. "Holbert's? This the night clerk?—Speak louder—What?" The oldest man dropped the bills which he had been counting. All heads bent toward the instrument. "Look here," the commercial traveller went on. "Do you know where Sadie Dutton lives?—Sadie Dutton—Sadie Dutton—Dutton—Yes. Well, this is a matter of a life."

Nixon drew the back of his hand across his eyes and the others began to believe that the commercial traveller had not lied from one point of view.

"There isn't a moment to lose.—What, eh?—No, No, I'm speaking in New York. Not Mrs. Dutton; I want Mrs. Nixon. Do you get that? N-I-X-O-N. Get her to this telephone just as quick as you can—No, I must talk to her—What's that?—I'll hold it."

"The night clerk is dressing!" exclaimed the common human being as if he could actually see. "He's hurrying." "He may not find her!" the college youth cried. "She may not be there."

"I hope," mumbled Nixon unsteadily. "He's afraid he'll win this bet," whispered the common human being soberly to the oldest man. The latter went on counting the money, bill by bill, with ridiculous care.

"I can just see the clerk pulling at the doorbell," said the college youth suddenly. "What in thunder will they think of it at this house?"

"Even if she's there she'll have to dress," went on the common human being, rolling his knuckles under his fingers. He looked at Nixon. "Gee!" cried that individual, expelling a breath long held and sitting down again. The company fell into a blank silence, to which the clock on the white tiled wall marked time. After several minutes from the plunge room outside there came the sound of two attendants talking together in a confused mumble.

Suddenly the commercial traveller gripped the receiver hard and lifted the instrument with shaking fingers. "Hello," said he, catching his breath after the first word. "Who is this? One moment." He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "Gentlemen," said he. The others leaned toward him. Nixon sat with his elbows on his knees, gazing straight at the telephone with a wide, unwinking stare. "We are now at the finish."

"Ask it," said the oldest man harshly. The commercial traveller put his mouth to the annunciator, cleared his throat and withdrew his hand. "This is about John Nixon—your husband. He no longer has any money. Can you hear that? Will you let him come back to you?" the pleading tone of his voice exhibiting the fundamental inability of all men to attain to perfect justice. "I am his friend. Hold the line and answer when you are ready."

Nixon sat bolt upright in his chair. "Let 'em come!" he exclaimed, setting his jaw.

The college youth with quick inspiration rolled a weekly magazine into the form of a megaphone. "Give me the receiver," said he, holding the paper cone up before it. It was only a second before the answer came, clearly enunciated as if the woman stood in their midst.

"I ain't unforgivin'," said she brokenly. "I've been a-prayin' he'd come back."

"Let me!" said the oldest man brokenly, snatching the instrument out of the commercial traveller's hands and gazing down at Nixon, who had buried his face in the angle of his elbow. "Let me!" He drew the mouthpiece to him as tenderly as if it had been a delicate living organism. "He's coming back to-day," said he clearly and slowly and with determination. Then he placed the receiver softly on its hook and put the instrument on the table beside the pile of bills.

The college youth grabbed Nixon's hand. "Shake, old man," said he. "You're lost!"

Nixon raised his head and looked from one to the other, stupefied with joy. The commercial traveller stood up. "Gentlemen," said he, "I know the top of the world, so to speak. I suppose I need it as much as any of you, but—Well, let's call the bet off. Eh?"

"Not by a jugful!" cried Nixon with a boyish shout. "I'm bust! I'm bust! Thank God!"

The college youth said, "He's right!" ran to the door, opened it, balanced himself on the edge of the plunge, and with a yelp curved his body into the icy water. The common human being sought the same relief. As they thrashed about in the water, the other three, laughing, watched them for a moment, and then Nixon and the commercial traveller followed. The oldest man and an attendant roared at them excitedly that the performance might cost them their lives, but they came out pink flushed and gasping healthily.

"Good luck," they answered, one after another, as they shook their hand. Not one of them said more.

The commercial traveller and the oldest man, however, followed him half-way to the stairs. "Oh, I just wanted to say," said the former. "You may be right about money, but that idea of yours about buzzards!"—he shook his head vigorously. "It's all wrong. You're off about that. When you go out you'll see blocks and blocks filled with people and people. But say, old man, it's surprising—on the level—how decent they are about it. Good-by!"

Nixon looked at the commercial traveller for a minute. "Oh, sure!" said he. "The oldest man wheeled quickly away. "Here!" he shouted to an attendant. "I want my rubdown," and then he looked back affectionately at the miserably thin body of the commercial traveller and the back of his head with its display of prominent ears, and quoted stonily to himself: "He put his hands again upon his eyes and made him look up, and the other was restored and saw every man clearly."

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"Go to blazes, you buzzards!"